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SUBJECT: AN OPENING ON AUSSIE QUARANTINE?

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Australian quarantine regulator has ruled that Philippine bananas can be imported into Australia.

The Deputy Prime Minister publicly asserted the agency's independence and implicitly defended the decision. This could be an indication of a changing direction in Australian quarantine practices, although we are still awaiting the GOA response on a recently-concluded quarantine review. End summary.

¶2. (U) On November 12, Biosecurity Australia (a government organization) after study recommended in an import risk assessment that Cavendish bananas from the Philippines be allowed into Australia under "strict import conditions." The Australian banana industry immediately began to complain, alleging Australia did not need to import bananas, and claiming diseases could enter on Philippine bananas that would threaten Australian agriculture. Stakeholders have until December 12 to lodge an appeal.

¶3. (U) On November 25, Acting Prime Minister Julia Gillard defended Biosecurity Australia's independence before Parliament, telling opponents they could appeal the decision. She called the process "transparent, a scientific assessment, it's independent of government."

¶4. (SBU) Comment: This is potentially quite a big deal. First, despite the claims of Australian producers, there is sufficient demand in Australia for more bananas, as evidenced by their high prices in Australian groceries. Second, it is telling that the Deputy Prime Minister, while acting as PM in Kevin Rudd's absence, stood up before Parliament to defend the agency. This decision comes a few weeks after the conclusion of a GOA review of the quarantine decision - although the GOA has yet to release its response to the review. All together, these actions appear to confirm what Agriculture Minister Tony Burke and Trade Minister Simon Crean separately told the Ambassador in meetings early this year (reftel), that the Rudd Government is committed to a "science-based" quarantine system. Australia's quarantine regime is probably the toughest in the world, and serves as a significant non-tariff trade barrier in an otherwise very open trading regime. This could be a significant, positive development.

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